

Self-Respect in Higher Education

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I – Concepts

The notion of self-respect appears in many literary works as well as in real life. Here is a literary example cited by Robin Dillon (2004, 47) from George Bernard Shaw's play *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1894):

“When her daughter, Vivie, challenges Mrs. Warren's life in the world's oldest profession, Mrs. Warren defends her path as better than the “respectable” options that were open to her as a poor girl: working as a scullery maid or scrubbing floors for a few shillings a week “with nothing to look forward to but the workhouse infirmary,” working in the factory until she died of lead poisoning, or marrying a laborer, who'd likely turn to drink, and struggling to feed his children. These options were, she insists, not just more miserable than the path she chose but morally worse: “How could you keep your self-respect in such starvation and slavery? And what's a woman worth? What's life worth? Without self-respect!”

Of course, we don't have to agree with Mrs. Warren regarding her work as a prostitute. For one, her daughter, Vivie, doesn't agree, nor do many others including Dillon herself (she brings further examples that disagree with Mrs. Warren). Still, Mrs Warren does not misuse the concept of self-respect and this is what is important for us. For, it helps us understand what 'self-respect' exactly stands for in our thinking and emotional life.

Here is how Dillon (2013, 4776) defines self-respect: “Self-respect is an appropriate and engaged appreciation from a moral point of view on oneself as having morally significant

worth...self-respect is *due* respect for oneself, *proper* regard for one's dignity; to say that a person respects herself is to say that her self-regard is morally appropriate." Self-respect is thus a moral notion, a self-reflective moral attitude that is also evaluative in nature. But exactly what form does this evaluation take? What is it that we evaluate and how? Here, we find an important distinction that permeates the philosophical literature on the notion (Darwall 1977).

Recognition self-respect involves an "understanding of oneself as having intrinsic worth and moral status just in virtue of being a person, and of the moral constraints that personhood entails" (Dillon 2001, 66). In short, this kind of self-respect focuses our self-worth on our identity as persons. It is a complicated matter, though, what makes us persons. Personhood has intrinsic worth, at least in the Western tradition, in virtue of three features: equality, agency, and individuality. We are morally equal and thus demand equal moral recognition: we are persons of equal dignity and we resent it when this dignity is violated. The other aspects of personhood concern manifesting this dignity by living in a way that respects the norms that arise from one's worth as a person. Thereby we avoid a certain form of shame arising from the fact "that one's worth and identity are threatened by failure (real or apparent) to live up to one's standards and expectations as a person (agent, individual)."

While recognition self-respect focuses our self-worth on our identity as persons, *evaluative self-respect* does the same with regard to our character. This stance consists in a certain normative self-conception and evaluative self-respect expresses our confidence in our merit based on this self-conception. "Evaluative self-respect contains the judgment that one is or is becoming the kind of person one thinks one should be or wants to be, or more significantly, that one is not or is not in danger of becoming the sort of person one thinks one should not be or wants not to be" (Ibid. 67).

Many would consider this an overly broad account of evaluative self-respect, however; one that would identify this form of self-respect with *self-esteem*: a feeling of self-worth, a positive form of self-appraisal rooted in the perceived excellences of one's person. Importantly, though, self-esteem is much a thinner and non-moral notion when compared to evaluative self-respect. Take the following – all too familiar - example (Dillon 2004, 61):

"Consider, for example, someone who has a favorable attitude toward himself based on having amassed great wealth and power through business deals that involved bribery, fraud, brutal elimination of rivals, and other manifestly immoral activities. It is easy to see this as someone who values winning and having the guts to get what he wants and

thinks he deserves, who thinks that scrupulous people are just sapless suckers and wimps, and who esteems himself for living powerfully and profitably.”

Without a doubt we can say that self-esteem manifests itself in this case in the form of pride. We might think this pride is misconceived; but we would hardly question the fact of feeling of self-worth. But would we also say that this person has self-respect? That he can hold his head high, that he lives a worthy life, a life worthy of a person with dignity? Most probably not. And this is because evaluative self-respect is grounded not merely in any odd normative self-conception, but in a moral ideal: in the norms that are entailed by our worth as persons. That is, evaluative self-respect builds on recognition self-respect. Those who have the latter strive to live by these moral norms; those who have the former strive to become the kind of person who lives by such norms. Unlike the billionaire in our example, Mrs. Warren is one of those persons: She chooses to be a prostitute because she thinks that other alternatives are degrading for her as a person (a judgment that, as noted, can be doubted) and while she is no doubt proud of herself for what she has achieved (to provide a good life for her daughter), her positive self-appraisal goes beyond this: she thinks she has lived a worthy life, a life of dignity and integrity. She has, she thinks, no reason to feel ashamed, to feel self-contempt or self-loathing – emotions we can associate with the lack of evaluative self-respect.

Recently, some have argued that the above distinction is not enough to fully characterize the importance and depth of self-respect in our mental economy. In particular, they point out that there is a deeper level that underlies both kinds of self-respect above. Robin Dillon coins the term *basal self-respect* to refer to this phenomenon (Dillon 1997, 241). Basal self-respect is crucial: at its heart is “our most profound valuing of ourselves”. As Dillon puts it, “Whereas recognition self-respect expresses, “I matter because I am a person”, and evaluative self-respect expresses, “I matter because I have merit”, basal self-respect expresses simply, “I matter”” (Dillon 2001, 68 n. 45). If our basal self-respect is secure and positive, we have faith in ourselves, we have confidence in ourselves, we are secure of our worth. But when it is damaged, “basal valuing is incessant whispering below the threshold of awareness: “you’re not good enough, you’re nothing”” (Dillon 1997, 242). Since this is the base, when it is gone or is just partially eradicated, the effects are psychologically even morally debilitating: such a person experientially understands herself as (near) nothing, as (near) worthless. “Damaged basal self-respect”, writes Dillon, “creates a damaged self” (Ib. 243).

Here is an example; an instance of what is often called *impostor syndrome* (Bortolan 2018, 62-3 quoting McElwee and Yurak 2010, 188–89):

“my program/major is perceived to be ‘the best’ with the highest-quality students enrolled in it. On numerous occasions, the girls in my program constitution. have been told we’re ‘so bright and outstanding’ by professors, advisors, etc. Many feel only the brightest students make it into the program and by being here, it proves our intelligence and character. They assume we’re all responsible, organized, hard-working, dedicated students. However, that’s not the case... I felt ashamed. I was with 2 dozen girls who were bright and great people and I felt like I didn’t measure up to them. Like I shouldn’t be here and I’m probably wasting somebody’s time.”

Of course, the student in the example could be right: that she in fact doesn’t ‘measure up’ to the other students, that it is a mere fluke, or worse, cheating that she is in the programme. But as a matter of fact, this is not the case. The student did not get into the programme as a result of cheating or of some kind of accident. She is there because she deserves to be there and, deep down, perhaps she also knows this. Then we have a complex emotional syndrome on our hands (see Dillon 1997 232-3 for more worked out, albeit artificial examples). For, in this case, the student has all the reason to respect as well as to esteem herself; still, she is incapable of this. She might even feel shame at what she considers to be her failure to not be proud of her achievements (getting into the programme and staying in it). What is more, this is likely to be not an episodic phenomenon for the student: the incongruity between her emotional response and her beliefs doesn’t go away; it is “persistent, even recalcitrant, impervious to rational criticism, argument, and reconceptualization” (Ibid. 234). What the student is lacking is basal self-respect and without it all her thoughts and emotions are built on sand: they have no foundations.

II – Theories

Historically, the most influential theorist to place self-respect in his moral philosophy was the German enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant. To do so, Kant used a controversial ‘device’: duties to self. He argued that we have duties not only to other beings, but also to ourselves. In particular, we have a duty to respect our own dignity as rational beings and thus we shouldn’t act in ways that abase, degrade, defile, or disavow our rational nature. In short, we have a duty of recognition self-respect (Dillon 2018, 49). In his *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) Kant argued that many specific duties follow from this general duty: the duty not to commit suicide, not to misuse our sexual powers, to avoid drunkenness and other forms of self-indulgence, the duty not to lie, the duty to avoid self-deception and so on. He also argued that

the general duty is basic: without it we cannot have duties to others either. Kant also discusses evaluative self-respect as a positive motivational force, especially in his *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and in his *Lectures on Ethics* (1779). For him this form of self-respect appears as a combination of noble pride (in our morally worthy achievements) and humility (the realization that we nevertheless fall short of perfect morality) (Dillon 2018, 50).

Kant focuses on duties to self, but self-respect clearly has an entitlement dimension as well: others have also a duty to not act in ways that impede or disrupt one's development of self-respect. In short, we have a right to self-respect. Among contemporary philosophers, the American philosopher John Rawls has made this entitlement dimension of self-respect a cornerstone of his philosophical system in his *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and subsequent works. According to Rawls, the social bases of self-respect determine both our capacity to pursue our conception of the good life as well as our confidence to carry out this pursuit. As Rawls (1971, 440) puts it: "Without [self-respect] nothing may seem worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them". It is not clear whether Rawls understands self-respect along recognition or evaluative lines; still, his message is clear: the provision of self-respect becomes a matter of justice and social institutions can be judged on the basis whether they sustain self-respect. Rawls primarily uses the appeal to self-respect to argue for an extensive system of basic rights and liberties. Recently, many have extended the use of self-respect to argue for further redistributive policies such as, for example, a universal basic income scheme (McKinnon 2003; Schemmel 2019)

Self-respect also plays an important role in other contemporary theories. In his *The Decent Society* (1996) Avishai Margalit argues that a 'decent society' "is one whose institutions do not humiliate people, that is, give people good reason to consider their self-respect to be injured" (Dillon 2018, 51). Axel Honneth's influential recognition theory in his *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995) and subsequent works pictures social and moral progress as a 'struggle for recognition'. He distinguishes three stages based on three main forms of mutual recognition. The first is universal respect that is unconditional on merits, desert or other particularities; the second is love, or care that is similarly unconditional; the third is esteem, which is conditional on merits, desert or other particularities. The corresponding attitudes toward the self are (recognition) self-respect, self-confidence and self-esteem. These self-relations concern oneself "as an autonomous agent who is equal amongst others (self-respect), or as a singular being whose needs matter and who needs to be loved (self-confidence), and as a bearer of abilities or traits that others can value (self-esteem)." (Laitinen 2015, 59)

These are all general, comprehensive theories that are somewhat removed from everyday reality. However, starting perhaps with Boxill (1976), self-respect has been used directly to theorize about real-world struggles against oppression, or stigmatization against different groups of marginalized, vulnerable people via institutions, images and actions. There is also a steadily growing feminist literature that aims to re-conceptualize the concept of self-respect and connect it to the still ongoing suppression of women and, more broadly, gender inequality as well as LGBTQ+-related challenges. This part of the literature often brings into focus the connection of self-respect to other notions, be they epistemic concerning, for example, access to knowledge including self-knowledge or moral, in particular, concerning certain virtues and vices related to self-respect (Borgwald 2012; Dillon 2018). Lastly, the concept of basal self-respect, as we saw, is used to explicate and analyse important psychological phenomena often connected to the struggles of vulnerable, oppressed groups such as the impostor syndrome or the battered wife syndrome (e.g., women living in abusive relationships).

III – Higher Education: Challenges and Responses

From a systemic point of view, there is clear interconnection between self-respect in its various forms, and education. The connection, moreover, concerns our entire educational system, hence separating out the institutions of higher education is not easy, if not impossible. There are many ways of conceiving of the aim of (higher) education. Recently, perhaps three such conceptions have been influential (Honneth 2015). On one view, the aim of – especially: higher - education is producing and transmitting marketable skills: the focus is on selectivity, individualised assessment and the encouragement of competitive behavior. On another view, education – starting already at the primary school level - is about developing individual autonomy: to teach students to be free and independent, to encourage and habituate them to put forward their own ideas and proposals. On a third view, education is democracy-oriented. Here the idea is to look at pupils and students as future citizens of a democratic republic: to teach them ways of working together, producing knowledge together, via a shared process of learning and problem-solving. Students can thus be prepared for their future role of being citizens: to participate in the public legitimation of their own choices without fear and shame. Again, this starts already on the primary school level: education, on this view, is a process of empowerment and emancipation that often takes the form of acquiring practical habits in the earliest stage of upbringing and socialization (Jørgensen 2015).

The market-based view of education has little space for self-respect and even self-esteem. After all, the emphasis is on statistically measurable skills and other results and this has a positive connection to one's self-conception only if that shares its evaluative ideal with the market, as it were. That is, if students don't share the prevailing view of market-related individual merits (how much one is 'worth' on the annual *Forbes* list), a system that is built around this ideal can hardly help them to respect and esteem themselves. Of course, the marketized view of education does have a significant role for the 'student experience'. Since students are taken to be consumers who pay for a particular educational service and therefore are entitled to expect an educational product in return, significant efforts are made in today's higher education to attract them and then to retain them. One way of doing this is to use education to boost their self-esteem: to make them feel good about themselves. However, such an instrumental and indiscriminate attempt is likely to turn out to be counterproductive; besides, as decades of psychological research shows, making everyone feel good about themselves is no panacea to all our social and psychological ills. While no one doubts the motivational force of self-esteem and that low self-esteem can cause problems in education (e.g., Mal Ferradás et. al. 2020), we no longer think that high self-esteem is necessarily good. In fact, there is plenty of psychological research that connects it to vulnerability, aggression, violence, prejudice and other psychological and social problems (e.g., Baumeister et. al. 2003; Hallsten et. al. 2012).

The other two models have more place for *self-trust* (and corresponding self-confidence), which in turn connects intimately to self-respect as well as to self-esteem. Take the second model. *Autonomy* is a complex and disputed concept. But at least on a procedural understanding of it, autonomy requires controlling one's own life, which in turn requires competence in discovering one's talents, beliefs, and values (Meyers 1995). Of course, there are situations when one has reason to question oneself. In fact, we teach our students to be critical and questioning and of course this also involves their own views. However, the kind of self-trust concerned here is more basic – what it rules out is a sort of fundamental self-doubt: “to lack general confidence in one's own ability to observe and interpret events, to remember and recount, to deliberate and act generally...a lack of any sense that one is fundamentally a worthy and competent person” (Govier 1993, 108). If one doubts oneself on this fundamental level, one cannot function as a person. Without trusting, in this way, one's own memory, interpretation, motivation, one will constantly question one's own idea of what has happened to one and/or to others. Without this form of trust, one is not able to depend on oneself to carry through decisions and act on one's own values in difficult situations.

Many phenomena that are much discussed these days connect in here. *Gaslighting* is a form of psychological manipulation in which a person sows seeds of doubt in another person regarding their memory, intentions, perceptions and so on. The *battered woman syndrome* is also partially dependent on self-doubt ultimately leading to the conviction, on the woman's part, that she deserves the abuse. And self-doubt is also a core characteristic of the already discussed *impostor syndrome* when one, often a woman, believe that one is not as competent as others perceive one to be (one is a phony, as it were). And the list continues.

In all these cases, the suffering subject entirely lacks or only possesses damaged autonomy; this much is clear. It is also clear that the subject possesses no or little self-respect and self-esteem. Why is this? The important point is that institutional systems, not only individual relations can have such detrimental effects. In fact, even going beyond this, the informal organization of society, for example, society's male-dominated relations, through the family and other institutions, can also significantly contribute to making matters worse. And, of course, education belongs to these formal and informal structures; hence it is not surprising that both aforementioned models of education lay a heavy emphasis on promoting self-trust and self-confidence from the early stages of education.

On the third model, this is also connected to democracy and democratic citizenship. As venues of shared learning and problem-solving, schools are miniature democracies on this view; universities, as centres of higher learning, are – or should be – even more so. Democracies treat people as equals. In addition to freedom, equality is considered standardly to be what makes democracy valuable in itself. But this doesn't only mean interpersonal respect for others as equals but also *intrapersonal* respect – one needs self-respect and self-esteem coupled with or based on self-trust to be – and to feel to be - in the position to participate in republican self-legislation as equal among equals. No wonder that several of the theorists mentioned previously – Rawls and Honneth in particular - place self-respect in centre stage in their own moral theorizing.

What does this require in down-to-earth educational terms? Many things can be said here. On the organizational level, an increased level of *workplace democracy* might be warranted (Frege, Herzog & Neuhäuser 2019): abolishing, as much as possible, hierarchical structures; involving students in decision-making; putting an end to the artificial separation of administration and the rest of the university; viewing the university as a community of scholars and students. We can also learn a lot from the much-admired Finnish education system. In Finnish primary and secondary schools, pupils from different educational background remain in the same schools together as long as possible; tests and examinations are reduced to a bare

minimum; communicative responsibility and mutual trust are given much greater weight than individual attributability; and choices regarding teaching methods are made by the professionally trained teachers themselves in cooperation with student representatives (Sahlberg 2012).

Although the context and nature of higher education is different, many of these ideas can be implemented at universities and other higher-education institutions. Perhaps even more so since higher-education institutions have more means at their disposal: through formal set of structures and activities (lecture, seminar, tutorial, workshop, private study, assessed work) with a socially loose framework that offers a curious variety of opportunities for intimacy, distance, collaboration and isolation, power and transformation, self-respect as well as respect for others can be effectively promoted (cf. de Souza & e Souza Placco 2012). This is a process of *self-other recognition* in which one's intrapersonal recognitional attitude – self-respect, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-trust – develops through the establishment of interpersonal recognition – respect, esteem, confidence, trust. Axel Honneth's theory builds almost exclusively on this process and higher education plays a crucial role in it.

Digitalization of education is another area where challenges and opportunities co-exist. The use of virtual public spheres – discussion forums, digital roundtables, videoconferencing and so on – as well as the use of social media can be important means of engagement and involvement boosting the participants' self-respect and self-esteem. But as is well-known from everyday life and the media, the dangers of using these products of the 'digital revolution' are all the more apparent in today's pandemic-riven, divided world.

Another challenge is *multiculturalism*: the heterogeneity of the students in the classroom as well as of staff in the institution. Regarding students Honneth (2015, 31-2) takes a positive tone: "the less a pupil is treated as an isolated subject meant to deliver a certain performance, and the more he or she is approached as a member of a cooperative learning community, the more likely is the emergence of forms of communication that allow not only for a playful acceptance of cultural differences but that positively conceive of such differences as opportunities for mutual enrichment."

What are the main dangers from the point of view of self-respect? *Stigmatization* appears to be an obvious candidate: no one should be considered a secondary member, citizen, student, staff member just because of who they are (because of any particular individual trait, for example). *Marginalization* is also crucial to avoid: the already existing marginalization in society (by skin colour, sex and so on) should not be reinforced and as much as possible should be resisted. Vulnerable groups should be protected in educational systems by all means

possible. And as is evident from the above, steps have to be taken to boost women's and other marginalized and vulnerable groups' self-trust and self-confidence.

IV – In Place of a Summary

In a recent story in *The Atlantic* ('The Confidence Gap'), the authors, Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, report their research on the surprising phenomenon that many successful women, all accomplished and highly competent, exhibit high degrees of self-doubt and self-confidence. Their focus is on working professionals, but they also cite examples from education. Here is one:

“David Dunning, the Cornell psychologist, offered the following case in point: In Cornell's math Ph.D. program, he's observed, there's a particular course during which the going inevitably gets tough. Dunning has noticed that male students typically recognize the hurdle for what it is, and respond to their lower grades by saying, “Wow, this is a tough class.” That's what's known as external attribution, and in a situation like this, it's usually a healthy sign of resilience. Women tend to respond differently. When the course gets hard, Dunning told us, their reaction is more likely to be “You see, I knew I wasn't good enough.” That's internal attribution, and it can be debilitating.”

Kay and Shipman then ask the question: where does it all start? On the 'nurture' side, they focus on three formative places: the elementary-school classroom, the playground, and the sports field. They are no doubt right about this. However, higher education is also an important factor. Although, by its nature, it is certainly not where the negative processes begin, it is undoubtedly one of the major venues where they continue and, potentially, gather further force.

Kay and Shipman then go on to propose ways of reducing the confidence gap. They claim that “Confidence is not, as we once believed, just feeling good about yourself”. This is a reference to the once central role self-esteem had been believed to play in this area. And, of course, they are right about this: I have noted this myself. But then they claim that *action* is the crucial factor: “So confidence accumulates – through hard work, through success, and even through failure.” But if what I have written has any grain of truth to it, the problem is nowhere near this simple. For, why someone lacking confidence would *ever* act and thus accumulate confidence? Self-confidence and self-trust are multifaceted phenomena. They relate not just to self-esteem (the arguably most superficial level), but to the three kinds of self-respect I've distinguished at the start of this entry. Institutional systems, including those of higher education,

must be clear on which of these layers they are best placed to target before they devise methods of reducing the confidence gap. In general, as demonstrated, higher education has an important role in empowering the development of self-respect in our societies.

V. Suggested reading

The literature on self-esteem is dominated by psychological research; the literature on self-respect is almost entirely philosophical. With this in mind, here are some recommendations for further reading.

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On the difference between self-respect and self-esteem:

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On the connection between self-esteem and education:

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